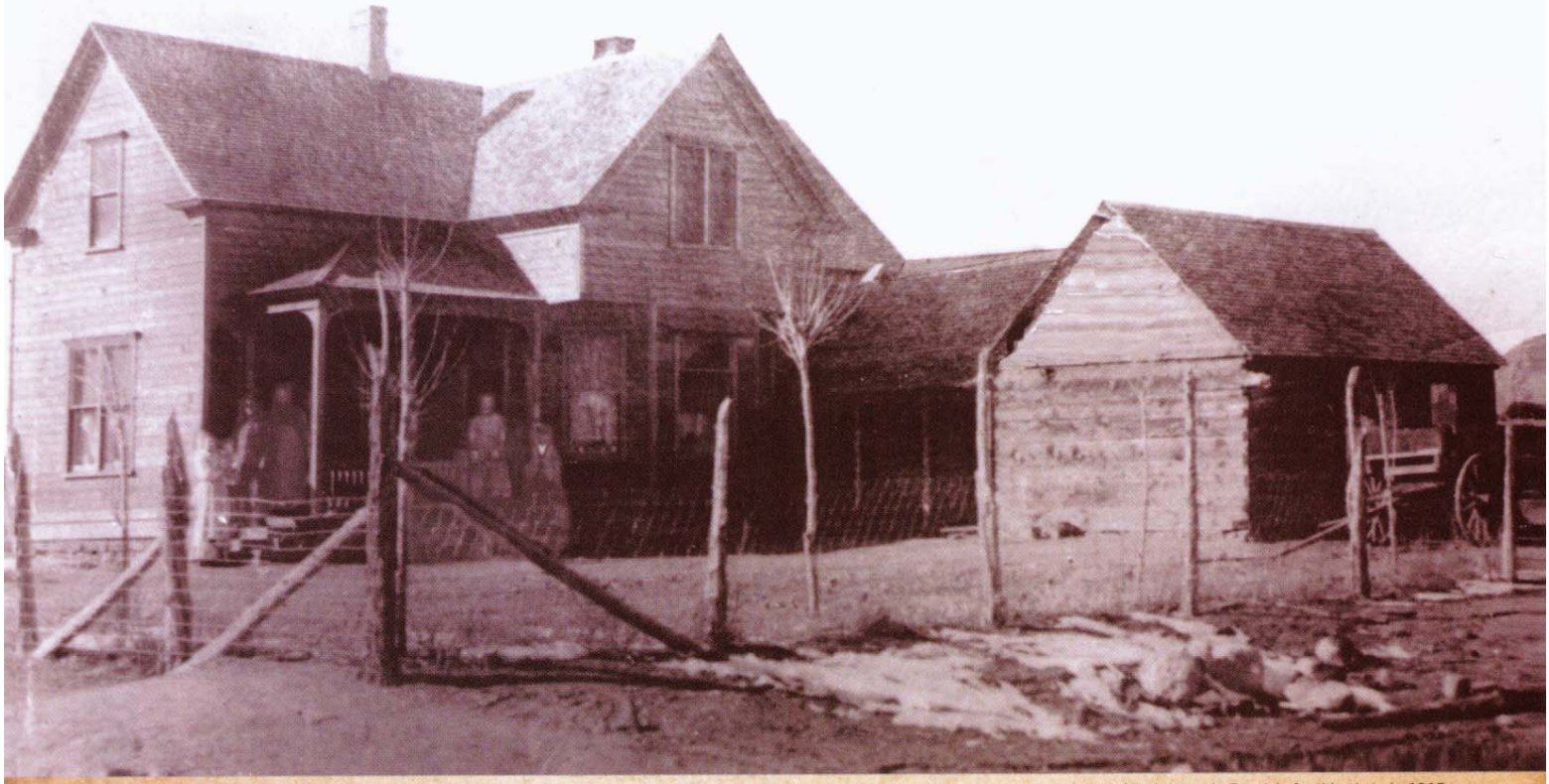
THE HOUSE REMEMBERS

BY STEVE LUTZ



Courtesy of Lell Heaps

The William Heaps family gathered on the front porch of their home in Teasdale for this photo in 1915.

The first thing you learn when renovating an old house is that age is relative—relative to the framing, the plumbing, the electrical system, and relative to the times and people who lived there. My old house was built in 1905, but some parts are significantly younger. Things were added and things were taken away. Each change affected more than might have been intended. As I work, I watch for signs of how the house has changed and I wonder about the people who did the work.

Photo by Clark Knight

Restoring an old house requires careful study. A house needs to be treated, in part, as an archaeological site. Measurements and photographs should be taken, sketches drawn, artifacts carefully removed, layers of wallpaper and flooring peeled back, spirits preserved. These are all things I have done as I attempt to restore my hundred-year-old house in the town of Teasdale in the redrock country of Wayne County, Utah.

Sue and Steve Lutz have been restoring the William Heaps House and uncovering its history for the past six years.

The Lutzes combined a dining room and a bed room on the main floor of the house to create a living/dining space.

Pioneer Builder

An original settler, town founder, and carpenter named Isaac Goodwin built this house for William Heaps and his family to replace the log cabin they had lived in since moving from Escalante in the late 1890s. The house has a cross-gable floor plan with four rooms downstairs and four rooms up. It is a simple design, attractive and practical.

Downstairs there was a parlor with its own porch entrance. It has been converted into a bedroom with a drop-ceiling which absolutely has to go. Upstairs there was one finished bedroom, two others were roughly framed, and another had wide rough-sawn planks nailed to the wall and ceiling over old newspapers.

Isaac didn't need much in the way of plans. Like many early Utah builders, he built from pictures in his head, transforming those visions with wood and stone, glass and handmade adobe bricks into solid, lovely houses that would last generations. But Isaac was no structural engineer. A few structural members have failed over the years causing some walls and floors to permanently tilt or sag.

I cannot assume any part of this house is square, plumb, or level. All of my carpentry is compensatory. I try to split the difference between true and the facts of hundred-year-old framing; I try to fool the eye so that the new square window in the trapezoid-shaped north wall looks right. I jack things up and reinforce them, and, if I do my work right, you won't notice a thing.

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One of the Family

I have a 1915 photograph of the house. The family is standing in the shade of the porch looking stiff and formal. I'm told they were not usually like that. One of the girls in the picture, May Heaps, inherited the house in the 1940s and lived in it until her death in 1980. This information and the picture itself came from William's great-nephew, Lell Heaps, who still lives in town, along with many other descendants of its pioneer settlers.

Lell is seventy-something years old and in failing health, but his memory, voice, and guitar playing are still strong. We have become friends since I bought his family's old home, and he invited me to his fiftieth wedding anniversary. Some elderly guests convinced themselves I was a relative, probably cousin Hattie's long-lost son, Robert. I told them I wasn't related. I had just bought their Aunt May's house and was fixing it up. They hugged me and said it was great the old home was back in the family. My further protests were met with cake and punch. I smiled and thanked them. I guess I'm related to the house now too.

Old Home Evolution

When we bought the house in 2000 it didn't much look like it did in 1915. Sometime in the 1950s, an itinerant window and siding salesman came to town. He convinced May and her husband, Sam Adams, to replace the original tall, narrow, double-hung windows with short, wide aluminum sliders. Then he covered the unpainted Douglas fir siding with pink asbestos hardboard shin-

A wood-fueled Majestic stove still warms the kitchen in the Heaps House.

Steve Lutz has encountered many of the travails of restoring an old home, including getting a new square window in a trapezoidal wall to look right.

The Lutzes discovered the frame of a transom window when they restored the tin ceiling in the kitchen.

gles. Some of the windows and doors were taken out completely and merely sided over. Apparently, he was a hell of a salesman. His handiwork is still evident on half a dozen other houses within a few blocks of here.

The breezeway and the attached barn shown in the 1915 picture are gone, replaced by the bathroom addition and a lean-to storeroom on the north side. The old log cabin nearer to the road with its root cellar basement is gone too, but its prior existence is indicated by a depression in the lawn.

Inside the house are many changes not revealed in the photo. Teasdale didn't get electricity until 1938. Before that, the house was lit by candles, coal oil lamps, and acetylene lights. The acetylene gas was generated in a heavy steel pressure chamber about the size of two stacked coffee cans installed on the back porch. Inside the chamber, water dripped onto calcium carbide to produce acetylene, the most explosive of all gasses. This gas ran through my house in tiny copper tubing about the thickness of the ink tube in a ballpoint pen. More than one old house exploded and burned due to malfunctioning acetylene generators or lights.

The plumbing system also evolved over time. In 1912, the hand-dug water ditch was made obsolete by a pressurized water system feeding a single spigot installed just outside the back door. The Heaps family continued to haul water into the house in buckets and heat it on the wood-fueled cookstove that still graces the kitchen with its warm glow. Some 20 years later a small addition was built on the east side of the house for a toilet, sink, and claw foot bathtub.

The walls have seen their share of changes, too. The original lathe-and-plaster walls fell victim to plumbing and wiring projects and were replaced by thick cardboard-like sheets of Celotex covered with multiple layers of floral wallpaper. A big archway was cut in the wall between the dining room and bedroom to create the current living room. In one room upstairs, the walls and ceiling were covered by hundreds of tiny pieces of salvaged drywall creating a bizarre mosaic. The other two upstairs rooms had no finish at all and were open to the rafters and studs and the nearly ceaseless wind.

Sam's Handiwork

Sam Adams was not as handy as the builder Isaac Goodwin. Sam built the bathroom addition that tilts crazily on the east side. He dug a cesspool right next to the foundation on the north side causing that corner of the house to sink about four inches. Later, he had the cesspool pumped out and put a septic tank in the same hole and then built the storeroom on top of it.

His wiring consisted of one main wire running through the entire upstairs floor with short sections stripped bare, twisted together with other wires for branch circuits, and then wrapped with cloth tape. I found these wires when I tore out the floor. I am still amazed they hadn't caused the place to burn down. If that wasn't enough, the notches he cut to accommodate the wiring in the undersized floor joists weakened them to the point that you could see the movement of a person walking upstairs in the downstairs ceiling.

Although Sam's work was not up to Isaac's standards, he had his own talents. Sam was a fine horseman and a notable cowboy. He never learned to drive an automobile and traveled only by horse or donkey wagon until his death in 1970. The local kids would always clamor for a ride with him.

Sam was also a master leather worker. According to Dwight Taylor, who grew up across the street, the sway-backed shed on our property was Sam's tannery and more. It was a place where boys and old men swapped skills and stories. Sam taught the boys how to skin a deer and turn the carefully-scraped hide into the softest of leather. He told them about Butch Cassidy, Sundance, and the Spanish treasure he had found in a lost cave and was never able to find again.

Spirits of the Past

On this cold, bright fall night, I wish to visit with Sam and May's ghosts. I have questions that will never be answered without them. What were all the other people in the dog-eared photograph like? Was Butch Cassidy as nice a man as people around here still attest? Were there transom windows into the parlor, as

Sam Adams built this small addition to house a bathroom and laundry around 1950. The Lutzes plan to jack up a corner and stabilize the foundation to correct the crazy tilt on this example of Sam's handiwork.

the framing seems to suggest? Was there a piano here and what tunes made it ring?

You may have heard someone say, "If these walls could only talk. . ." The walls of my old house do talk. I have found newspapers, magazines, ancient and well-repaired shoes, toys, letters, shopping lists, bills, clothing, and school lessons. Each artifact says something to me about the people who lived here, what they cared about, and some of what they wished for. I hope they would approve of my craftsmanship or at least of my intentions towards their home. I know the last family that lived here approves. They've been back to look around and comment. According to them, I haven't screwed it up too badly yet.

Not that I haven't made mistakes. I've fallen through the ceiling twice when I had the floor open while placing a new joist alongside an old one to strengthen the floor. I've shocked myself on circuits I thought I had turned off. I framed a window opening six inches off center and had to tear it all out and start again.

Of course I am not doing all of this difficult work for those who lived here before. I do it to fulfill my own vision. I do it to have something to show for my efforts. Working on this house contrasts with my job, which at the end of a week leaves me wondering just what I've accomplished. Here I can see the results. If I build a wall this week, it will still be here in a month, a year, maybe in a hundred years.

But truth be told, I do care about what the ghosts think of what I am doing to their house. They are my consultants, my advisors, the inspectors of my craft. I definitely do not want to get a stop-work order from beyond the grave. So for them, for me, for those who will live here a hundred years from now, I try to do things right. The insulation, the heating ducts, the carpentry, and especially the wiring, I try to do as if the whole family were watching. ❁

When not working at the Utah Fire & Rescue Academy or fixing up one or the other of their 1905 houses with his wife Sue, Steve Lutz is probably playing bluegrass and old-time music with his band, Tangle Ridge. Contact him from the "Contact us" link at Tangleridgeband.com

The Lutzes have added some of their own history to the house, like the rocking horse Steve's grandfather made for him that stands atop an antique pie safe in the kitchen.

This shed once housed a tannery where Sam Adams shared his skills and stories.